Briançon and the Briançonnais

Located at 1326 meters above sea level, Briançon is Europe’s highest located city. From the old parts of the town, almost unmodified since the 16th century, one has a magnificent view of the mountain ranges of the Haut Alpes department. Although the city of Briançon is beautiful in itself, the true beauty of this department is to be found in the Briançonnais, the landscape around the city. This document describes some of the possibilities for outdoor activities in the Briançonnais, focussed on (half-)day trips during summer.

Parc National des Ecrins

Briançon is situated immediately east of one of the larger French National Parcs: Les Ecrins. Parc National des Ecrins has become an example of combining nature preservation and tourism. This makes this Parc an excellent place for all sorts of outdoor activities, ranging from mountain hikes and (off)road biking, to multi-day alpine trekking tours, rock climbing, para-gliding and white-water rafting. Apart from Briançon itself, where cable carts start that can drop you off at 3000 meter, the Parc can best be explored from the neighboring towns of Valliouse and L’Argentière la Bessée.
With respect to getting around in the Briançonnais, although busses (and trains) run between most towns, having access to a car extends one possibilities quite a bit as busses do often not run regularly and do not always stop at the most interesting spots.

For more information on the Parc, visit http://www.les-ecrins-parc-national.fr (in French), and for photos of the region http://www.rogiervanrijn.com (in English).

**Hiking**

Briançon, but especially L’Argentière la Bessée and Vallouise are the starting points of numerous well-marked paths on which, especially during early morning hours and late afternoons, one has a good change of encountering an ibex, gemsbok or marmot or spot patches of Edelweiss. Starting points for hikes can be found in Briançon itself, where especially the Cerces range will offer beautiful hikes with a good change of seeing gemsbok. The hikes starting from Pont de Alp in the direction of Col de Lautaret are best for trying your changes on seeing ibex. The hikes near Vallouise, especially the ones going up from the high mountain village Ailefroide, are stunning. These hikes, in a valley with 1000 meter high limestone and granite faces at both sides, offer extremely good chances of seeing marmots. A bit further into the Vallouise valley are hikes going up from the “Refuge Les Bans”. These hikes are relatively easy, but give a good feeling of being in the wild mountain nature of Parc National des Ecrins.

For the more adventurous hikes, taking a “Via Ferrata” could be a highlight of a stay in Les Ecrins. Via Ferratas (Iron Roads) are marked mountain trails covering steep slopes or mountain walls by means of ladders and steel cables for support. Hiking a Via Ferrata is not recommended without some prior experience. If there is sufficient interest, we can arrange for some experienced locals to assist during a Via Ferrata hike. For those who are experienced, a map with marked Via Ferrata trails is available at the tourist office and in numerous sport shops.

Another possibility for a unique mountain experience is the La Crave cable cart. From La Crave, one of the most beautiful mountain villages in the region, a cable car goes up more then 3000 meters to a glacier. Even experienced mountaineers will be impressed by the beauty of the famous summits of the “La Meije” and the “Rateau”. Hiking on the glacier itself is only recommended with good high mountain experience and glacier equipment (rope, ice-axe, crampons), or with a trained mountain guide. However, hikes are possible without special gear from the mid station, and (the surroundings of) La Grave itself are also worth exploring.

Although hiking does not require an extensive amount of gear, make sure that you have good walking shoes that support your
ankles and which you have worn in. Also, as weather in the mountains can change quickly, drops in temperatures of over 15 degrees Celcius are not uncommon, make sure you take sufficient warm (wind and waterproof) clothes with you. Just to repeat that last statement: with the height comes quite significant drops in temperature, so be warned and take sufficient warm clothes with you when you go hiking! Apart from warm clothes, be sure to carry sufficient water and food with you.

Biking

The combination of mountain ranges and well-paved roads makes the Briançonnais an ideal region for road biking - specially for those bikers who consider steep descents and ascents a challenge instead of a nuisance. An excellent destination for a day trip is the Alp d’Heuz, one of the famous climbs of the Tour de France. When this is a bit too much, the Briançon region has a lot of Cols that can provide as much challenge as one wants; an especially beautiful ride is the Col d’Izoard. A Col that is not that easy, but one that comes with views over impressive landscapes and a famous Tour de France history. Those who prefer a somewhat more gentle but equally beautiful ride might find what they are looking for on the cross-country skiing trails in the valley between L’Argentière la Bessée and Vallouise. These beautiful trails make excellent (mountain) biking trails during summer.

Apart from those tracks, a large number of off-road single track trails have been developed throughout the Briançonnais. These trails, accompanied with the numerous unpaved mountain roads (that are sometimes undistinguishable from real “off-road” terrain) will make sure that no off-road biker will leave disappointed.

However, renting a bike can be problematic, as many bikers bring their own bikes and the locals prefer motorized transportation... Best chance for renting a reasonably good bike is at Bouticyle and Intersport (near the Geant supermarket) in Briançon.

Rockclimbing

Although not as well known as some other regions in France, the Briançonnais offers a broad range of beautiful rock climbing opportunities which have nurtured a large number of famous rock climbers. Still, rang-
ing from easy 2-rated routes to almost impossible to climb high-8 routes (5.3 to 5.14a American scale), and from 10 to 700 meters in length, Les Ecrins offers a challenge for both beginners and experts.

For those who are able to lead sport climbing routes, “topos” (maps describing routes) can be bought at most local bookstores. Walls close to Briançon that are especially good are found in Valley of Nevache and at Rocher Baron, although to get to the latter requires quite some driving skill (and a good rental car insurance). If you want more detailed information, please contact me with your climbing level and interests, and I will see what I can do for you.

For those who have a limited amount of experience (or no experience at all) in rock climbing, we can arrange for a morning of climbing on one of the easier walls.

With respect to gear, we can arrange for the rental of ropes and harnesses for a possible beginners session. Although specialized rock climbing shoes are recommended, one can get an fine first experience just using sporting shoes. Bring a pair that has an as sticky sole as possible, and that support standing on a sport of a ladder with just your toes. (E.g., running shoes are often less ideal, snug fitting canvas basketball shoes will suit better.) Although a helmet is recommended on all routes, most people only use helmets on the more difficult routes.

**Rafting and Kayaking**

Because of the continuous supply of melting water from the glaciers, the Briançonnais has a large number of streams and rivers, of which a couple provide excellent rafting and kayaking opportunities. If you are interested in kayaking or rafting, best bet is to contact the Briançon tourist information or the hotel a couple of weeks in advance to inform about the possibilities. Other options for renting kayaks are found in L’Argentière la Bessée and Vallouise, information on those options can be found at the tourist office. Please be aware that the water levels are less controlled as in the USA, so sudden changes in water level and difficulty might make your trip quite different than expected.

**Para-gliding**

For para-gliding, your best chance is to contact to tourist information in Briançon ahead of time to inform about possibilities. Most para-gliding schools offer both weekly classes and single tandem-glides.

**Who am I?**

My name is Rogier van Rijn, I’m a Dutchman living in the Briançonnais training to become a professional mountain guide. If you want more information on what to do where, please contact me at the addresses printed below.

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